DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 125 JC 890 157

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TITLE Mandated Entry- and Exit-Level Testing in the State of Florida: A Brief History, Review of Current Impact, and a Look to the Future. Research Report No. 87-04.
INSTITUTION Miami-Dade Community Coll., Fla. Office of Institutional Research.
PUB DATE Jan 87
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the California State University Conference on "Student Outcomes Assessment: A Tool for Improving Teaching and Learning in the CSU" (Pomona, CA, October 15-17, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Achievement Tests; Community Colleges; *Degree Requirements; Educational Testing; Higher Education; *State Legislation; Statewide Planning; *Student Placement; Teacher Role; Test Construction; *Test Use; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *College Level Academic Skills Test

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the Florida State Legislature has mandated that all students who enter colleges and universities must write one of four test batteries for the purpose of placement and that all students are required to pass an exit exam, the College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST), at the end of the sophomore year. This paper examines the impact of mandated entry- and exit-level testing on the curriculum and on the assessment process in general. Part I considers the purposes of entry and exit testing, and questions whether there is a direct link between improving the quality of education and the initiation of standardized testing to ensure that common learning has occurred. The argument is put forth that standardized testing programs for entry-level placement and exit examinations can effectively assure that students who need remedial courses are adequately placed and that certain basic concepts have been learned before an associate degree is awarded. Part II focuses on exit-level examinations, discussing the nature and function of the CLAST, the exam's development, the overall cost to the state for the CLAST, and the impact of the test. This section also considers the nature and function of entry-level testing programs, including the role of placement testing in the developmental process, and assesses costs and impact. Finally, part III provides personal observations and comments regarding mandated testing. This section argues for greater reliance on departmental examinations and even baccalaureate-level exams to relieve teachers of the time-consuming, frustrating, and often onerous task of assessment and permit them more time for teaching. (AJL)

ED305125

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January 1987

John Losak

A Speech Presented at the
California State University Conference on:
Student Outcomes Assessment:
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October 15-17, 1986
(Kellogg West Conference Center)
Pomona CA

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MANDATED ENTRY- AND EXIT-LEVEL TESTING IN THE STATE OF FLORIDA: A BRIEF HISTORY, REVIEW OF CURRENT IMPACT, AND A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

In the State of Florida the legislative decision making process has impacted two major areas of testing in higher education in recent years. All students who enter colleges and universities must write one of four test batteries for the purpose of placement (effective 8/1/85) and all students are required to pass an exit examination at the end of the sophomore year (effective 8/1/84). These two major pieces of legislation have had impacts on curriculum and on the assessment process in general.

PART I

The purpose of placement testing should be to select those pathways for curriculum instruction in which the student is most comfortable intellectually with respect to his/her academic level of preparedness. Students who demonstrate through a sample of behavior on an algebra examination that they know little or nothing about algebraic concepts would be extremely uncomfortable placed in an algebra course. Therefore, it is believed that learning can be enhanced by placement in a lower level course in which the student can make adequate progress and learn the skills required by the college or university.

Exit testing has an entirely different purpose, and in the State of Florida that purpose has primarily been to assure the public that students leaving the sophomore level are competent in the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. It is extremely important to put in the context of the examination the purpose from which the examination was derived. If, for example, some states desire to assure that students have a fundamental knowledge of the general education curriculum expected of students in public universities in a particular state, then the examination should be one which measures those skills and knowledges expected of students who matriculate the curriculum established in the state. The purposes for which the assessment program is undertaken should be as

explicitly and clearly stated as possible so that appropriate samples of behavior might be taken in order to guide judgments.

A major assumption is that the judgments arrived at through the decision making process can be sounder and perhaps even wiser if there are objective and standardized measures of achievement reviewed by the decision making bodies prior to arriving at final judgments. It is unquestionable that the judgments will be arrived at with or without an exhaustive testing program; rather, it is a question of whether those judgments are improved through the use of an exhaustive testing program. My opinion is that a standardized testing program either for course placement or for exit examinations can positively influence the judgments which are needed at these two points. Although it is useful to know the student's high school curriculum with regard to making initial course placement decisions, it is very well known that some students who take a high school algebra course do not experience the same level of rigor or expectation in all high schools. Therefore, a common placement examination helps the advisor or other decision maker to work with the student to effect a more appropriate placement than could otherwise be achieved using only high school curriculum achievement as a basis for decision making. The same analogy holds for making decisions regarding the award of the associate degree for students who have progressed thorough two years of a college curriculum. Common testing has a way of assuring that common learning has occurred, in turn assuring the public, and the legislators representing the public, that those goals, values, and objectives deemed important and appropriate are in fact demonstrably achieved in an objective manner.

Does all of this say that there is a direct link between improving the quality of education and the initiation and use of standardized testing? I am guarded in my answer to that question. I think a direct cause and effect relationship is probably quite difficult to establish. I do believe, however, that there are important spinoff effects as we have found in the Sate of Florida which would encourage one to use common examinations of the sort being used in Florida. These spinoff effects that we have found at our institution, where I have conducted some research in this area, include improved faculty morale, strong student support, and strong community

support, all of which reflect a positive attitude toward higher education. Moreover, there is strong historical evidence that student learning is affected by the level of expectation that instructors and others have of the students. We have carried the message to our students through a variety of practices, including standardized assessment, that we are expecting more of them and there is good evidence that the students are indeed performing up to the higher levels of expectation.

It should also be said that the imposition of a standardized testing program on a shaky infrastructure would probably do no more than reflect the weakness of the infrastructure. If the purpose of the examination is to provide guidance with regard to the strength or weakness of the curriculum, then that may be a useful purpose for the testing program. However, the testing program per se, will not improve the quality of a poor infrastructure but may provide some guidance with regard to reforms which are needed in order for the curriculum to improve and hence for student learning to improve.

In summary, standardized testing programs for entry-level placement and exit examinations can be effective societal vehicles for assurance that certain basic concepts have been learned before an associate degree is awarded and for further assuring that students who are in need of remedial efforts do in fact receive the remedial courses. Further, there is evidence that the initiation of such a testing program conveys a message of positive educational value to many constituencies in higher education including students, faculty, and lay citizens. It is well to remember that one of the real dangers of testing is to infer that all low-scoring students should be denied entrance. The several studies that we have conducted convince me that simply because a student is initially academically underprepared upon entering the open door two-year college in no way predetermines that learning cannot occur.

PART II

EXIT LEVEL EXAMINATIONS:

A. What is the Nature of the College-Level Academic Skills Test?

The CLAST examination consists of a series of achievement examinations designed to measure the communication and computation skills which community college and state university faculty members expect of students completing the sophomore year in college. It includes four subtests, an essay plus multiple choice examinations in writing, reading, and computation. The essay examination is 50 minutes, the reading and writing subtests combine for 70 minutes and the computation subtest is a 90 minute exam. In all, the student is expected to set aside 4 1/2 to 5 hours on a Saturday morning to write the examination. The exam is offered three times per year and the student must be eligible to graduate during the term in which the examination is written. By law, an Associate in Arts degree cannot be awarded to a student who does not pass all four components of the examination at established passing scores. However, a student may upon passing three of the subtests be admitted provisionally to the State University System during which period of matriculation the fourth part of the CLAST examination may be retaken so long as the student does not enroll for more than an additional 36 credit hours.

B. What is the Function of the Examination?

The CLAST examination is viewed as but one component of an overall effort in the State of Florida to assure that students have acquired academic skills expected of them by the time they complete their sophomore year. There are several other major components of educational reform which have been initiated at the State level in Florida over the past five years which impact directly on the attempts to raise basic functioning levels of matriculating students.

C. How Was the Examination Developed?

In the spring of 1979, a law was enacted by the Florida legislature requiring identification of basic skills. In August of that same year the office at the State level which directs the program was established. There is a two-year period during which these skills were identified, developed, and item specification developed. These specifications were reviewed and refined and a test administration plan initiated in 1982. The first administration of the CLAST occurred October 23, 1982, and for three years students were required by State law to write the examination in order to receive an A.A. degree but were not required to achieve any minimal level skills. Effective August 1, 1984, minimal scores were required on the examinations for students to earn an A.A. degree. These scores will increase in 1986 and 1989. One of the most sagacious decisions of the entire process was to phase in the scores beginning with a relatively low passing score and ending with a score that the panel entrusted with this decision decided was important to have by 1989.

The primary focus in the development of the examination was on content validity. There were minimal reliability studies conducted and there is still some concern regarding reliability, particularly of the reading portion of the examination.

The process for establishing the passing scores was quite elaborate. Each college and university in the State of Florida established a panel that was directed to be as widely represented as possible, including student participation on each panel. Each of these panels reviewed the examination in a series of regional meetings held throughout the state, and on the basis of their content analysis, professional judgment, and general expectations of the level performance expected of students at the end of the sophomore year, made some decisions regarding the percentage of items students should answer in order to pass. By and large, the decisions reached for passing were at a level which would have had an extremely harsh impact on the student progress in the State of Florida. For this and other reasons, a decision was made to phase in the scores, with passing requirements established and increasing in 1989.

IV. Cost

It is difficult to estimate the overall cost in dollars to the State of Florida for the CLAST examination. At Miami-Dade alone we have estimated that the direct costs are very close to $7.00 per student. These costs include the payments made for persons to work on Saturday to administer the examination, some minor compensation for the testing directors, and the help of a part-time person to keep records and process material related to the CLAST throughout the year. This figure does not include the costs that are related to writing specific computer programs at Miami-Dade to process the test scores, nor does it relate to the other programming efforts associated with this project. Also not included are all of the associated clerical costs which take the time of the in-place staff. The State awards a contract to the office of instructional resources at the University of Florida and the cost per student tested is approximately $13.00. If to the local cost ($7.00), and state cost ($13.00), a 25% indirect cost is added, then $25.00 per student multiplied by students tested in 1985-86 yields $868,050.

V. Impact

One of the primary impacts has been the clear message to the faculty in the state of Florida that their evaluations of students in the past has not been satisfactory. The requirement that students have minimal scores before they are awarded an A.A. degree is having continuing influence on decision making of the award of grades by faculty. Higher test scores have been occurring over the period that the administration of the examination has taken place. One must be cautious in interpreting the meaning of the higher scores because there are at least two major competing possible interpretations: 1) are there simply better students who are writing the examination or 2) have efforts to improve the curriculum been successful and the scores which are higher reflect clear improvement in student skills. The next major impact area has been fewer graduates in the State of Florida. At Miami-Dade, for example, our graduation rate has been reduced by 40% and this will in all probability be diminished further when the 1989 standards are in place, assuming that the performance level is

similar to that in 1985. The next major impact is a differential impact by ethnic category with black students showing a more severe impact.

Entry-Level Examinations

The entry-level testing program in the State of Florida has been centralized at a State level during the past two years. The purpose of this portion of the paper is to provide a brief outline in terms of the nature, function or purpose, the developmental process, and impact of the entry-level testing program in Florida.

I. Nature

The examinations which are permitted for entry-level placement testing in the State of Florida are SAT, the ACT, the ASSET program and the Florida MAPS. The SAT and ACT are well enough known. The Assessment of Skills for Successful Entry and Transfer (ASSET) is an achievement examination developed by the ACT corporation which was normed on two-year colleges students. The Florida MAPS consists of the Test of Standard Written English, and the Descriptive Tests in Reading, Writing, and elementary Algebra published by the College Board. The examinations each take varying times, but by and large there is a three to four hour testing period.

II. Function or Purpose

The primary purpose of the examinations is to improve initial classroom placement in the basic skills areas of Reading, Writing, and Mathematics. As with all course placement programs, the intent is to place students where they are most intellectually comfortable and to increase the probability of success for both students and faculty.

III. Developmental Process

Placement testing for students who arrive at a two-year college underprepared has been in use for many years in many colleges within Florida

and outside the State of Florida. For example, Miami-Dade opened it's doors in 1960 using a placement examination which was required of all full-time, first-time-in-college students in order to most effectively place them with regard to their level of preparedness. The State of Florida became more interested in centralizing this effort when it became important for legislators in the State of Florida to answer such questions as: How many students arrive on our campuses who are in need of remedial work? As long as there were 28 two-year college and nine universities each of which was generally free to choose whichever placement testing seemed most appropriate, and to independently set cut scores, it was extremely difficult for this question to be answered. When a survey was taken about four years ago asking the number and percent of students eligible for remedial work across the State of Florida, the reported results ranged from "no students are in need of remediation" at one two-year college, to a high of 65% on the other end of the range. The legislature about two years ago demanded that the State move forward in the direction of approving entry-level placement examinations and approved the four tests mentioned above for implementation. In January of 1985, two-year colleges were required to choose from among the four and to implement in January. The entry-level testing cut scores went into effect July 1, 1985.

These cut scores were arrived at through a deliberative process of a small group of persons selected by the Commissioner of Education from throughout the State of Florida with whom I was privileged to serve. In addition, these persons were joined by representatives from ACT and SAT. The final compromise moved away from the one test that was wanted by the legislature to the selection of four potential examinations to be used by the colleges. In my view the judgment was a wise one, permitting as it does the universities to continue with the SAT or ACT for admissions purposes while permitting the two-year colleges to select from a more appropriate instrument to be used for course placement purposes.

IV. Cost

The cost of the program is not nearly so expensive as it is for the CLAST with respect to new monies since most colleges were already

expending funds for course placement and because the examinations are not secure. Expenses are involved, however, in systematizing the efforts and in reporting the data. Our direct costs at Miami-Dade are approximately $4.50 per students tested.

V. Impact

The impact of the entry-level testing program, again compared with CLAST, is not nearly so dramatic. It is clear that one of the impacts is to focus attention on heightened interest in testing and assessment programs throughout the State of Florida. My judgment is that the program has had little or no impact on enrollment since most colleges make it clear in the State of Florida that this is a course placement test and not an admissions test and most students are interested in starting where they can at least have a reasonable chance of success. I can share with you some recent data that we have from Miami-Dade that relates to the questions of performance on entry-level basic skills test. There are three features which stand out (1) About two-thirds of all the students entering the College are in need of some college preparatory work as demanded by State regulations. State law now requires that if a student is below the cut scores established at the State level that those students take college preparatory work. (2) There continues to be, as might be expected on the basis of the history of achievement testing, a differential impact by ethnic group. (3) A higher proportion of students who fall below the cut scores are actually placed in college preparatory work. These are the three major, but not surprising, findings thus far with respect to impact from the entry-level testing.

PART III

INTERPRETATION AND REFLECTION

In this third section I would like to provide some personal observations and comments regarding mandated testing by state legislators. CLAST is in place in the state of Florida essentially because the public, as reflected in the vote of the legislature, lost faith in the assessment

process used by instructors to arrive at grades. Why has it come about that many students who received the associate degree--reflecting the collective judgments of about 20 different instructors that these students could function at a "C" level or better in classroom, when as measured by the CLAST examination many could not read, write, or compute at a high school level?

In brief, it is I believe, because: a) instructors evaluate on a normative basis. The talent that is in front of them decides the norm; b) instructors generally have been asked to take on a role of psychological measurement and evaluation for which they rarely have either the training or inclination. I would submit that a grade of "C" awarded to a student in an introductory psychology course at Swarthmore does not reflect the same content mastery as it does at an open door two-year college. One important component of this grade inflation issue is the negative psychological impact felt by many instructors who might be--often would be--faced with awarding a very high proportion of "F" grades if the same expectations for content mastery were to be demanded at each institution, i.e., a very select liberal arts college versus an open door community college.

As for the combined role of instructor and evaluator, it is clear that American higher education does not prepare its graduates in discipline areas for the role of psychological assessor. Some more severe critics have argued that a Master's degree or Ph.D. in chemistry, history, geography, or English, etc. has not prepared the graduate to either instruct or to evaluate. I will focus only on the more obvious criticism, viz. that the chemistry instructor or math instructor turned loose in the classroom to spend perhaps one-quarter to one-third of her/his time in the process of psychological measurement has expectations held out by the institution that go well beyond the background and training of the instructor. I am including in my estimate of time spent the efforts needed to conceptualize, develop, score, and interpret tests, return them to students, and interpret the materials to the students. In all likelihood most of the instructors in the disciplines I mentioned above have not had a single course in psychological measurement, much less more advanced courses in assessment.

If my analysis is any where near accurate, it seems to me the most viable solution is to loosen the teaching and evaluation components of the educational process expected of instructors. This is not a new idea. At the University of Florida, which was an open door land grant institution for many years, all students for the first two years took their general education courses offered by way of a system in which the university examiners prepared the tests with virtually no role for evaluation on the part of the instructor. This system was modeled after the University of Chicago system put in place by Robert Hutchins. I would submit that the institution where it is most important to separate teaching from evaluation is at the open door two-year college, but since there are so many institutions in the United States which are de facto open door and in which instructors face fairly large class sizes, these two variables may be generalizable to a larger segment of higher education than the two-year colleges. Therefore, to the extent that there are large numbers of underprepared students enrolling in classes in the California State System, it would seem to be reasonable to raise the question of the extent to which teaching and evaluation might be appropriately more separate than they currently are.

Finally, does this suggestion to lessen the role of the instructor as evaluator suggest that standards be imposed from without and perhaps become an intrusion into academe? I believe there to be deep irony in the making of this argument for it is precisely our own inability within higher education to solve adequately the assessment issue that is leading legislative bodies to impose standards and procedures. Offering more reliance on common examinations (i.e., departmental and even baccalaureate-level examinations--which some colleges still do) will provide benchmarks, relieve the instructor from time-consuming, frustrating, and ofttimes onerous tasks, and permit more of a focus on the teaching function. It should also provide a more realistic basis for appraisal of student learning.

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